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AMERICAN EMPIRE AND THE WESTERN WAY OF WAR

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5605
Doing Military Strategy

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Since the end of the Cold War, America has enjoyed a degree of world supremacy unknown to any other world power for more than a century. American military, political and economic influence is spreading throughout the globe. Scholars and foreign policy elites now regularly debate the once taboo subject of American empire and its impact on national and global affairs. In today's world, the predominance of an empire is no longer measured solely by its territorial reach or holdings. Apart from military capacity, American empire stems from supremacy in the control of economic networks, financial flows, technical innovation, trade and many other areas, visible and invisible. In this sense, no other country influences world affairs as completely as America does.

Andy Basevich argues in his book, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, that the American empire is no accident; that it is the product of a concerted effort arising from a vision that dates back to the Founding Fathers. Basevich credits American historians Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams with identifying the strategy of "openness" which propagated American global economic influence in the 20th century and ultimately became responsible for American global economic dominance in the 21st century.

If America enjoys any sort of empire today, it is in no small way due to its superior military capacity, since at least the mid 20th century, to wage decisive war globally. America's military capability to conduct war today, embraces all the tenets of the Western way of war as presented by Victor Davis Hanson in *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*. Hanson argues that the West's superiority in war is due to Western philosophical premises and political institutions,

among them the development of vibrant markets, empirical energy, and technological innovation, all of which have been basic to the Western way of war.

A comparison of both authors reveals the synergy of their arguments as it relates to empire; specifically American empire. If America has been on a course to expand its world economic hegemony, it could not do so without the military capacity to support American policy in either limited ways or decisively in the context of the Western way of war. Both authors provide valuable insights that today's national security strategist should not ignore.

Basevich exposes the myth of America as the reluctant superpower in *American Empire*. He argues that historically, expansionism is integral to the American story. The U.S. has pursued expansion abroad to fuel economic growth in order to support national progress and the American way of life. Rather than colonial ownership or administrative control of territories, commercial access has been what has mattered most in the development of American foreign policy.

Today, America follows a classic strategy of non-colonial imperial expansion first developed in the early 20th century known as "open door imperialism." The early 20th century argument that a world open to American enterprise and influence is a world conducive not only to economic opportunity but also to political liberty, is one that resonates in 21st century foreign policy as well. Expanding the marketplace enlarges the area of freedom. Expanding the area of freedom enlarges the marketplace. Openness becomes a precondition of freedom and democracy.

Basevich grasps the importance of globalization to America. He argues that it has had a profound affect on U.S. foreign policy. Beyond economics, globalization is

ultimately about power and the opportunity to reconfigure the international order. The nation that leads the globalization race will establish the political and human values under which the rest of the world will live. The pursuit of openness in a globalized world is about Americans doing well first, and others a distant second. Yet, Americans tend to cling to Wilsonian idealism as justification for their involvement in the world. Therefore, according to Basevich, the nation's political elites have sought to hide the implications and purpose of global empire from the public. The promotion of peace, democracy, and human rights and the punishment of bad actors define the essence of American foreign policy, rather than the pursuit of self-interests first through the calculus of national power. If early American historians were concerned that the strategy of openness was actually a design for empire that could lead to the unrestrained use of military power, modern intellectual elites agreed that the age of globalization would create an international structure that would obviate the need for war.

Today, Basevich believes that the Department of Defense has transformed into a "Department of Power Projection." America's policy elites believe the nation needs a strong military that is capability based in order to prevail against any combination of adversaries anywhere in the world. Its purpose is to support the strategy of openness not simply to protect America's interests, but to promote those interests actively on a global scale.

Basevich argues that since the end of the Cold War, regardless of the rhetoric between democrats and republicans, U.S. administrations have maintained the same clearly defined national security policy consisting of four distinct but related imperatives. First is "the imperative of America's mission as the vanguard of history, transforming the

global order and, in doing so, perpetuating its own dominance.” Second is “the imperative of openness and integration, given impetus by globalization but guided by the United States.” Third is “is the imperative of American global leadership expressed by maintaining U.S. preeminence in each of the world’s strategically significant regions.” Today leadership has become a euphemism for the nation’s political elite, a codeword for empire. The fourth imperative is “the imperative of military supremacy, maintained in perpetuity and projected globally.”

Finally, Basevich argues that the self-delusional idea that America is by its very nature innocent of imperial pretensions has become untenable and counterproductive because “it impedes the efforts to gauge realistically the challenges facing the United States as a liberal democracy intent on presiding over a global order in which American values and American power enjoy pride of place.” America has established dominance in several regions of geopolitical importance, recognizes only the legitimacy of its own economic principles, has declared the inviolability of the existing order, and has established unquestioned military dominance with a globally deployed force configured not for self-defense but for coercion. “These are the actions of a nation engaged in the governance of empire.” America has created an informal empire and in so doing acquired an imperial problem. This fact is not a matter for celebration, nor should it be denied.

In *Carnage and Culture*, Hanson writes of nine battles that illustrate the lethality of the Western way of war. In each of these battles aspects of the Western way of war are developed: emphasis on decisive battle, the tenacity of constitutional states, reliance on heavy infantry, discipline and leadership, and technological power. He also proposes

that the superiority of Western weaponry was itself no accident but the result of a unique cultural tradition that sanctioned intellectual, political, and economic freedom. The Western cultural phenomenon of rationalism, free inquiry, the dissemination of knowledge, free markets, protection of contracts, capitalism, private property, and the rule of law created an environment in which scientific discovery, application, and innovation were encouraged and rewarded. Furthermore, Western markets, unlike non-Western markets, were capable of mass-producing weapons of war.

Is war a more natural condition than peace for the human race? It is interesting to note that freedom, democracy, and capitalism enable the Western way of war, which becomes the tool for ensuring the dominance of Western culture. Today, to ensure the dominance of Western culture, America preserves and advances its economic capacity for growth through the expansion of capital markets and democracy. Non-West cultures that do not wish to participate in the American ideal will resist. Obstacles to the advancement of American dominated Western cultural strategic interests will be removed, as a last resort, by the decisive capability of its military. Global competition between political, religious, and economic ideas ensures conflict for the foreseeable future.

Hanson argues that the deadly Western military tradition was handed down from the Greeks, to the Romans, and was adopted by the German-Celtic tribes of Northern Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West. Western martial tradition preferred decisive shock battle, civic militarism, heavily armed infantry, well-protected warriors, tactical sophistication, discipline, and training. Civic militarism meant consensual government, civilian control and audit of the military, declarations of war by elected assemblies, and the practice of mustering free, propertied males to fill the

ranks. Free men who are defending their own homes and liberties make better soldiers than those who possess no rights and are fighting for a distant ruling class or empire in which they are mere subjects. Furthermore, free men demonstrate a disciplined bravery, initiative, and adaptability in hard-fought battles that has proved decisive.

Hanson provides a point of interest for America today as it tries to impose its culture on non-Western peoples. He notes that hundreds of years of Greek rule failed to westernize the peoples of Western Asia, just as hundreds of years of Roman rule failed to westernize their North African and Middle Eastern populations. Alternately, the European populations absorbed the best of Greco-Roman culture.

For those who see globalization, rationalism, capitalism, and democracy as the seeds for peace and prosperity, Hanson warns that we “must remember that these ideas are also the foundations that have created the world’s deadliest armies of the past.” Byproducts of these deadliest armies- weapons of mass destruction copied by potential non-West adversaries- worry Hanson as he contemplates the future.

The synthesis of these two books provides strategic clarity for America’s complex security environment. Today, in the era of globalization, America leads a global war on terrorism. However, the war is not just about a threat to America’s physical security. It is also about the threat to America’s cultural viability- economic, political, and military. The war is an extension of the American policy of openness. The war is about creating new and stable markets for America and the world and preserving the ones that already exist.

America is an empire that spans the globe. American empire is not like the old Roman imperium. Rather, it is one in which America dominates world events, like it or

not, in many ways. America's military is far superior to any other and the gap is widening. The American ideal of freedom and democracy- its culture- is felt the world over, and it is unsettling to dictators who live off the suffering of their people. Democratic, market-oriented governments led by America, have done more for their people than any other form of government in history. America is not perfect, but neither should it apologize for the American ideal, which is unique in the history of nations. Nor should America continue to pretend that it is not an empire. It should embrace public debate on the application and national and global implications of its imperium.

American foreign policy is, and always has been, motivated by its self-interests first, rather than larger humanitarian interests. America has been the guarantor of Europe's peace and stability since WW II. It provides the same for the Western Hemisphere, the Middle East and Gulf region, and North and Southeast Asia. America involved itself in the Balkans to preserve NATO, to ensure its leadership in European affairs, and to preserve the economic viability of the region. America is involved in the Middle East and Gulf region because of the strategic importance that region holds to the world economy, to prevent the proliferation of WMD and terrorists groups that would use them against U.S. interests, and to promote freedom and democracy within the region.

Globalization has changed the security environment in an unprecedented and lasting way. If President Clinton was the first American president to embrace globalism, its opportunities and challenges, he will not be the last. Every U.S. administration from Teddy Roosevelt to the current Bush administration has maintained the same fundamental foreign policy design for national security- to promote freedom and democracy and the expansion of markets for U.S. economic growth. Every new U.S.

administration may have campaigned on the foreign policy failings of the previous one, but when the new administration took office, it embraced much of the same fundamental foreign policy objectives of its predecessor. President Clinton's national security strategy was one of engagement and enlargement. If the current Bush administration campaigned on being less involved globally, it soon realized upon seizing the reigns of power that it could not do so. That is why, all the rhetoric aside, the Bush administration foreign policy looks remarkably similar to the Clinton administration's.

Today, America engages the world diplomatically, economically, and militarily in order to enlarge the pool of democratic governments, free people and capital markets. Democratic governments and free people operating in an open market economy fuel growth and prosperity for all. This in turn provides new markets for American businesses, which fuels the American economy. It also provides the human, intellectual, and financial capital to maintain a military second to none, which ensures the security and stability of the global market. The American military is used either in limited fashion as a tool of American diplomacy or decisively as an extension of policy in a manner in which it inherited from its Western cultural ancestors. America's economic well being, standard of living, and security is dependent upon it.

September 11th brought the American people face to face with what many of its foreign policy elites had realized for some time before- that the world order of the Westphalian nation-state construct was far less relevant today than in the past. The United Nations provides many valuable services to the world, but collective security is not one of them. Transnational organizations and non-state actors empowered in the age of globalization have changed the rules forever. It is difficult to impossible to contain or

deter an enemy that lurks in the seamy underbelly of global society and that prospers and grows wherever failing states are found. These people and their organizations are often aided by rogue states who could otherwise not confront America using conventional means. This means that if America values its way of life, then it must understand that Afghanistan and Iraq are not the end. They are the beginning. America cannot afford to be timid or only hopeful. It will have to stay engaged and continue to shape a world that will provide stability and security for everyone, but for America first.

America is an empire today due to the success of its democratic institutions, economic vitality, military superiority and martial spirit consistent with Western culture, as well as its consistency in a foreign policy of expansion that spans more than one hundred years. However, realpolitik and idealism are not an either or proposition, nor have they ever been. America should continue to embrace Wilsonian idealism and engage and lead the world diplomatically. It should listen to its allies and compromise, where it can, over conflicts of national interest. America should actively seek ways to be humble and benevolent in the intercourse of international politics and diplomacy. However, America should not hold its future hostage to the hopes of idealism for its own sake indefinitely. As the dominant leader in world affairs, knowing when to act decisively is important. Having coercive or deterrent credibility means demonstrating the will and capacity to act when necessary. Others may not like it and they will complain. Nevertheless, they will respect it.

Hanson demonstrates that the Western way of war has been dominant throughout history and that free peoples embracing market economies and exercising democratic government have fueled this military dominance. Basevich demonstrates that within this

construct of Western culture, and at the end of the 20th century, America alone has established imperial dominance not by accident, but by a predetermined and long-standing foreign policy of openness. As Basevich states, America today is “committed irreversibly to the maintenance and, where feasible, expansion of an empire that differs from every other empire in history.” The question now is one of American willingness to accept the responsibilities of empire and its future. When American policymakers abandon the idealistic illusion of American innocence and present the issue to the American people for debate, the answers will come.

Works Cited

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